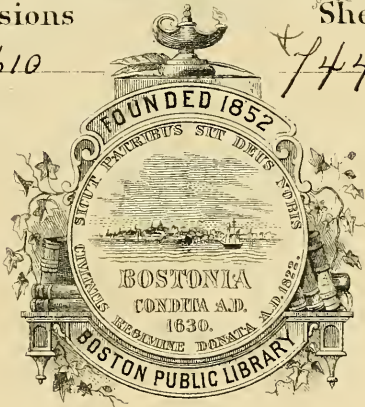


Accessions

114.610

Shelf No.

7440.17



Received. Apr. 29, 1871.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
Boston Public Library

PAMPHLETS.

7440
Sermons ~

Anniversary ~

Mr. _____ W.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.

THE EXISTING STATE OF THEOLOGY, AS AN INTELLEC-
TUAL PURSUIT, AND RELIGION AS A MORAL
INFLUENCE :

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL

IN

South Place, Finsbury,

ON

WEDNESDAY, MAY 21st, 1834,

BEING THE ANNIVERSARY MEETING OF

THE BRITISH AND FOREIGN UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION.

BY

JAMES MARTINEAU.

LONDON :

PRINTED FOR AND SOLD BY THE UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION, 3,
WALBROOK BUILDINGS, WALBROOK ; ALSO BY ROWLAND HUNTER,
72, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

1834.

A SERMON.

THE EXISTING STATE OF THEOLOGY, AS AN INTELLEC-
TUAL PURSUIT, AND RELIGION AS A MORAL
INFLUENCE :

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL

IN

South Place, Finsbury,

ON

WEDNESDAY, MAY 21st, 1834,

BEING THE ANNIVERSARY MEETING OF

THE BRITISH AND FOREIGN UNITARIAN
ASSOCIATION.

BY

JAMES MARTINEAU.

LONDON :

PRINTED FOR AND SOLD BY THE UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION, 3,
WALBROOK BUILDINGS, WALBROOK ; ALSO BY ROWLAND HUNTER,
72, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

1834.

PRINTED BY GEORGE SMALLFIELD, HACKNEY.

A SERMON.

ACTS ii. 7, 8:

AND THEY WERE ALL AMAZED, AND MARVELLED, SAYING ONE TO ANOTHER, BEHOLD, ARE NOT ALL THESE WHICH SPEAK GALILEANS? AND HOW HEAR WE EVERY MAN IN OUR OWN TONGUE, WHEREIN WE WERE BORN?

THIS week commemorates the most remarkable revolution of opinion that history records. If other anniversaries commemorate Christ, this celebrates the birth of Christianity; if others bring before us passages from his personal history, and tempt our thoughts to the scenes of his infancy, his sorrow, his death, his immortality, this recalls the history of his religion, considered as a set of influences operating on society. Christianity had finally passed from the lips and the life of Christ; it was no longer to be seen and heard; from the present it had been transferred into the past; it was just enshrined in that historical form which, first by the oral attestation, then by the written record, of disciples, has since been the medium of its agency on

the world. The Galilean missionaries had just made their first efforts in the holy city,—just braced their conscience to assume their anxious yet noble position, and plunged into all the responsibilities and perils and glory of their task. Even with the voice of the great Teacher still whispering in their memory, and the consciousness of inspiration fresh upon their minds, it was no light task, to peasants such as they, to re-awaken the passions which had acted the tragedy of the cross, and speak to priests of their guilt, to Jerusalem of its danger, to an unwilling people of their freedom and their losses. But they were strong in the command, “Go ye, and teach all nations,” and they went: and simple as were their instruments,—an utterance of power and miracles of love,—they set in action that mighty influence which has crumbled away superstitions consecrated by genius and time, and remodelled the sentiments and character of men.

We seek to diffuse a renovated Christianity;—amid the confusion of creeds to bring back the minds of men to the few grand principles which acted on the souls, and were heard from the lips, of apostles; which have maintained the vitality of the Christian system in every age; which our own times pre-eminently need, to conduct the process of social regeneration; and which alone can fulfil to the future the gospel’s promise of perpetuity. We feel on us a mission, in character less peculiar, but in obligation not less sacred, than that of the mes-

sengers of the resurrection ; the mission which devolves on all who have a love of truth to aid the agitation of thought. Not unfitting, therefore, is it for us to make this our week of Pentecost ; to surround ourselves with the recollections of those days when the Christian controversy was first rife in Jerusalem ; to feel sympathy with that earnest self-devotion with which, in the courts of the temple, at the very shrine of an exclusive worship, in the audience of a wily priesthood, amid the fears of trembling friends, and beneath, perhaps, the fiery eye of Saul, Peter stood erect to proclaim a faith, whose Providence was impartial, whose devotion was spiritual, and whose promise was immortal life. The instruments of our task are indeed different ; we have no touch of miracle with which to startle the careless attention, and, by banishing a pain of body, to create a listening serenity of mind. But neither does our mission require such aids ; for the powers against which they were matched have passed away. Judæa, then the strong-hold of un-social religion, was soon lost in the vortex of Roman dominion ; the imposing philosophy, the caustic scepticism, the graceful polytheism of Greece, were swept away by that hardy population of the North which was consigned to Christianity to educate ; and Rome itself, whose magnificence attracted the last feelings of regard to a mythological Paganism, has now become venerated again as the representative of a mythological Christianity.

Widely, however, as the modern reformer may differ from the ancient apostles, in the difficulties which he encounters and the agencies which he enlists, there was one feature in God's miraculous mode of disseminating the gospel which he may wisely imitate. The gift of tongues uttered to every tribe a different speech, and administered the same thoughts to the inhabitants of far-separated lands. And as this supernatural voice discriminated regions, so should our natural persuasion discriminate periods. The ages are no less diversified than the countries of the world; and each, having a peculiar character, must be addressed in a peculiar language; its genius and tendencies must be consulted by those who aim at its improvement. In varying the modes of exhibiting great principles, there is no compromise of their immutability; for, in proportion to the magnitude of a truth is its versatility of application; and, like those comprehensive formulæ in physical science which include in their statement innumerable phenomena, and either stoop to the solution of the meanest motion on the surface of the earth, or rise to the interpretation of the planetary courses,—the great moral truths which constitute Christianity alike illuminate the individual conscience, and determine those mighty social questions which agitate communities, and preside over the vicissitudes of the world. From inattention to this character of pliancy, many Protestant churches have indulged in an inconsiderate passion for imitating

the apostles ; and, like all imitators, they have copied most scrupulously the only circumstances which are unfit to undergo transference. Overlooking the noble intelligence with which those holy men threw themselves into the wants of their own times and seized the singularities of their own position, they have trusted, in the diffusion of reformed opinion, to that one system which the first missionaries of the gospel, in the possession of miracle and without the possession of the press, found most effectual for the dissemination of historical fact. With a desire to avoid this error, and to appreciate justly the existing relations of Christianity to society, I propose to inquire, what are the means to which we should now trust for the promotion of theological truth and the elevation of religious sentiment among the great body of the people.

It is a law of Providence in communities, that ideas shall be propagated downwards through the several gradations of minds. They have their origin in the suggestions of genius, and the meditations of philosophy : they are assimilated by those who can admire what is great and true, but cannot originate ; and thence they are slowly infused into the popular mind. The rapidity of the process may vary in different times, with the facilities for the transmission of thought, but its order is constant. Temporary causes may shield the inferior ranks of intelligence from the influence of the superior ;

fanaticism may interpose for awhile with success ; a want of the true spirit of sympathy between the instructors and the instructed may check by a moral repulsion the natural radiation of intellect : but, in the end, Providence will reassert its rule ; and the conceptions born in the quiet heights of contemplation will precipitate themselves on the busy multitudes below. This principle interprets history and presages futurity. It shews us in the popular feeling and traditions of one age, a reflection from the philosophy of a preceding :* and from the prevailing style of sentiment and speculation among the cultivated classes now, it enables us to foresee the spirit of a coming age. Nor only to foresee it, but to exercise over it a power, in the use of which there is a grave responsibility. If we are far-sighted in our views of improvement ; if we are ambitious, less of immediate and superficial effects, than of the final and deep-seated agency of generous and holy principles ; if our love of opinions is a genuine expression of the disinterested love of truth ;—we shall remember who are the teachers of futurity ; we shall appeal to those, within whose closets God is already computing the destinies of remote generations,—men at once erudite and free, men who have the materials of knowledge with which to determine the great problems of morals and religion, and a genius to think, and imagine, and feel, without let or hindrance of hope

* See Note A.

or fear. In short, the cultivation of theological science is of superlative importance, not merely with the object of preserving to a class an elevated and dignified pursuit, but with the more excellent aim of elaborating for society the purest views of God, of human nature, of life and immortality.

There are many, I believe, who will smile at the application of the word science to theology, and set it down to the account of professional pomp. And if this feeling exists, as it naturally may, in the minds of able and philosophic men, it is itself an illustration of my position. If they, who know well what science is, cannot trace its image in theology; if from the latter they turn away, as from a thing of much clerical but little human interest;—what can be inferred, but that the religious literature of our country is far below the wants of the higher class of intellects, and needs the accession of more earnest thought, profounder reasoning, and a more comprehensive spirit of research, in order to redeem it from contempt. This feeling of contempt cannot remain for ever confined to those who are professedly studious: it has already, indeed, extended far beyond them; and intelligent and reflecting men, who yet make no pretension to philosophy, look with aversion on the leaden and soulless productions of the theological press. It is not to be expected that the labours of the biblical critic should ever become popular: but the distaste for them in England proceeds from something else than the

mere dryness of philology. They are felt to be technical and cramped; the awkward toil of minds manacled by creeds, endeavouring to atone by microscopic accuracy for imbecility in fundamental principles, and not pervaded by that true spirit of history, that sympathy with the soul of antiquity, which is essential to the interpreter of the venerable monuments of the past. Nor does our practical divinity meet with a much warmer welcome. It does not succeed in penetrating to the interior wants of our moral nature; it strives, and menaces, and declaims for admission to the heart; it proves its right of entrance, and yet remains without; it does not pass the sacred boundary, and steal into the home inclosure of the affections. It has, in fact, ceased to address itself to the common heart of humanity, and become exclusively adapted to that peculiar class of persons called "the religious public"—a class trained under highly artificial influences, strongly tending to make them, if enthusiastic, mistake extravagance for imagination, and vehemence for feeling; and, if sober, correctness for beauty, and solemnity for depth.

To the reformers, who placed the Bible in our hands, we certainly owe the very materials for scriptural study; to their rejection of authoritative interpretations, the motive to its pursuit; and to their own personal research, an excellent opening to its ample field. Yet it may be doubted whether the low condition of theology in this country is not

to be ascribed, in part, to an ignorant use of the great principle of Protestantism; whether, in the eagerness to inculcate on every man the right of private judgment, the right has not been mistaken for the power. Urge on mankind their intellectual prerogatives, and be silent on their intellectual needs; invite their judgments, and starve their minds, and it is easy to foresee the result;—they will be at the mercy of every shallow adventurer, and learn from him to dogmatise where wisdom doubts. Grave and intricate questions will be submitted to incompetent arbitration; theological and philosophical opinions, whose evidence is a compound of science, history, criticism, will be summoned before a popular tribunal: the advocates will adapt themselves to their audience, and the quantity and quality of their reasonings, the style of their language, the nature of their illustrations, will be such as may best persuade the ill-informed and impress the unrefined. If theology, like all other sciences, had been first organized by the meditations of superior understandings, and then, so far as its character admits, rendered accessible to the general mind, it is impossible that its phraseology could have been so coarse and vague, its logic so cabalistic, its spirit so narrow. I do not mean to imply that there is any thing peculiarly difficult in the Christian religion. The historical records which contain it, do in fact convey its great essentials to every mind; and they would suggest nothing else, if we could

set mankind down to the study of them, with precisely the feelings which possessed the first hearers of the glad tidings. But to effect this simplification of feeling, to re-produce the natural and graceful attitude of mind with which the first converts listened, is the very difficulty which we have to encounter. Artificial conceptions, the long accumulation of centuries; subtle and scholastic questions, imbedded in the ponderous learning of other times; superstitious feelings, the heritage transmitted to us by generations of venerated men, have fastened themselves to the words of the gospel, and overwhelmed the simple and pure impressions which their fresh utterance awakened. And hence it is, that we can now penetrate to religion only through theology—one of whose great offices it is, to clear away this dust of antiquity, and restore to sight our temple of pure worship in its majestic and beautiful proportions. It is the task of minds inured to toil and thought, to conduct this laborious work; it is the right of others to learn how it proceeds; and there must be a welcome to all who can qualify themselves to take part in it: but that sectarian democracy, which abandons exclusively to the suffrages of the multitude the decision of theological perplexities on which erudition and philosophy pause, needs an emphatic discouragement. The question, how is this discouragement to be administered? is a branch of that great social problem which the times are rapidly pressing to its solution

—how are the evils, political and religious, of ignorance to be remedied? Society still fluctuates between two answers: one class eager to withhold from the uninformed all needless power; another, to afford them all needful knowledge. For my own part, I believe that consequences of immense magnitude depend upon the speedy triumph of the latter,—upon the reduction of authority to its minimum, and the elevation of intelligence to its maximum. And accordingly, the theological evil in question is to be extinguished, not by the legal recommendation of creeds, or spontaneous submission to them, not by any creation of ecclesiastical privileges, national or voluntary, but simply by the exaltation of public sentiment, and the communication of public self-knowledge. Nothing must be done to degrade the right of individual judgment—much to augment the power.

Another cause of the poverty of theological science is found in the fatal association between mental error and moral turpitude. Take this fallacy by itself, and there is scarcely any form of malignity for which it may not be regarded as accountable. But in order to see its intellectual effects in theology, it must be viewed in connexion with another mistake—the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. In almost all other points, Christians have differed from each other; and the efforts of each party to collect all the evidence for its own opinions, like the one-sided eloquence of the bar, may terminate in

the elucidation of the truth ; and though the minds of the individual advocates may be injured by their professional habits, to the public the ends of theological justice may be finally obtained. But while the contents of the Bible have been eagerly discussed, its nature and character, though a preliminary topic of inquiry, have been little proved ; and notwithstanding many scholastic distinctions between different kinds of inspiration, it yet remains to be argued, whether the sacred writings are literally inspired at all. This point has hitherto, with singular unanimity, been taken for granted, and erected into an essential : it has been regarded as an inseparable element of a faith indispensable to salvation. Hence have resulted not only the vast mischief of untenable claims in behalf of the Scriptures, and a meagre appreciation of their real perfections, but a retardation of almost every species of knowledge which exercises the human mind. The Bible being regarded as a depository of all knowledge, its chronology, its physics, its logic, its pneumatology, even its Judaical institutions, were conceived to be faultless. This very error, which for ages sustained the faith of witchcraft, is at present occupied in combating physical science with the cosmogony of Moses, and extinguishing the philosophy of morals by the tradition of the fall.* What science has it not embarrassed ! Through what a host of difficulties, amid what a

* See Note B.

storm of hostility, had geology to struggle into existence ! With what countless absurdities of speculation was it long encumbered, what incredible distortion of facts ! And all, that the dates of the Old Testament might remain intact ! And what has been the result ? At length it is discovered that revelation is not interested in shewing that the globe has been created only 6000 years ; and, as if to rebuke the narrow spirit that dreads the investigation of nature, as if to shew that the Creator is glorified by all knowledge, geology, while it has afforded no help to Deism, has given a fatal blow to Atheism. It has proved that the human species is a recent and sudden creation, and has not existed for ever, or been moulded by the gradual operation of merely material laws. It has laid distinctly bare to us the time when there was not a man on the earth : and thus, science itself has introduced us to the solemn moment, when the most magnificent and enduring of God's works was emerging fresh from the cloud of his power ; when that most complex and delicate of organizations, the human body, and that most mysterious and beautiful of creations, the human soul, first stood erect beneath the heavens and on the earth, and drank in the spectacle of their glories. Astronomy, too, notwithstanding the noble elements it contributes to our conceptions of the divine infinitude, has not been permitted to make its discoveries unquestioned ; and Newton's philosophy has been

assailed, lest we should have to alter our ideas of the six days' creation, and interpret afresh Joshua's command to the sun to stand still. And yet who that knows much of the young and intelligent, cannot testify to the power of this majestic science to quicken and elevate piety? How many holy thoughts have dropped from the heavens into the soul—thoughts as vast and still and solemn as their own midnight! How many boundless aspirings have ascended beneath the stars—aspirings as quenchless as those eternal fires!

Causes like these, by contracting the range, and lowering the tone of thought, have alienated theology from the respect of intellectual men; and a spirit of scepticism is diffusing itself among them, which all history proves to be unfavourable to the nobler forms both of morality and of genius. In this state of things society has now a deep interest, but for the future, a far deeper. The temper of which I speak cannot rest with the class in which it is now visible; by an irreversible law of the mental world, opinion has a downward gravitation; and, unless the process is arrested, Christianity must at length go out at the lower end of society. The shadow once upon the edge of the orb, who can forget, that it may creep on till the whole disk be blotted out?

Now, if the alienation of thinking men from Christianity were the result of such study as so grave a matter demands, a Christian might regret,

but could not censure, and ought not to interfere. But if it be only a hostility on the part of men of science to a system which has always been hostile to them ; if it be only the disgust of refined philosophy towards the spirit of vulgar dogmatism ; if it spring from the unhappy position in which theology has been placed by its abandonment to sectarian tribunals, then it is no time either for contentment or for despair. There must be no injustice done to truth ; the gospel must not be allowed to glide out of men's minds on the surface of slippery errors not its own. And who are the fittest men to vindicate its character ? Assuredly those who are not acted upon by the influences which have degraded it ; those who see in it nothing to repress, but every thing to stimulate, the intellect, the imagination, the affections ; who can place a generous faith in the adaptation of the human intellect to the attainment of knowledge, and feel that man can discover nothing which God has not previously made true ; who can contemplate theology, not merely in its bearings on a creed, but as it lies on the great sphere of human knowledge ; who can see how it is placed in the centre of the sciences, and holds affinities with all ; how its chronological chain of documents links itself to the annals of every age ; its traditions of the primeval globe invite confirmation or correction from the history or the philosophy of nature ; its records of miracle touch on the rules of evidence and the theory of causation ; its views of

life involve the principle of ethics ; its doctrine of Providence, the troubled question of moral agency ; its promise of futurity, the laws of the human mind, and the adjustments of human life. When men of this kind are encouraged by public sentiment to devote themselves to a free search into the resources of religious science ; when high powers of intellect, attracted by the mysteries of nature, life and miracle, can speculate on them without compromise of mental liberty, or loss of moral sympathy, there will be better hopes for Christianity. But so long as minds that would thus take on themselves the vow of consecration are compelled, by a system of mental monachism, to incarcerate themselves in a miserable cell of thought, and listen only to the mutterings of superstition, blind to the glories of God's universe, and deaf to all its diviner harmonies, what wonder is it that genius recoils, and flies from this self-annihilation ? The errors, then, which sustain this system must be removed : all association between guilt and any kind or degree of investigation must be broken ; and the question respecting the nature of the Scriptures must be discussed. The agitation of these points is a prerequisite to the very existence of theology as a science ; their settlement would effect in it a constitutional and organic reform, compared with which all particular grievances of doctrine are of little moment, and without which they cannot be redressed. Whatever public efforts may be made

for the diffusion of a system, it is to be hoped that those higher services to Christianity, those more philosophical modes of exhibiting it, will be increasingly cultivated, which are indispensable to its preservation in the superior orders of minds, and through them in society at large.

This adaptation of theology to the demands of studious men, forms, however, but a part of our duty to Christianity. The use of theology is to conduct to religion : within an envelopment of science there lie great principles of faith and morals ; and the administration of these to the soul of society is the ultimate object which sanctifies research. It is the business of theology to discover them ; to apply them, is that of religion. The two processes are related to one another, like the analytical and synthetical stages of physical science. The philosopher, by an examination of individual phenomena, and a detection of their mutual analogies, arrives at the knowledge of a general law ; and then, with the aid of this key, proceeds to the interpretation of appearances before unintelligible, and the prediction of others before unknown. And the use which he makes of the events of the material universe, must the spiritual teachers of mankind make of the Scriptures and the moral creation ; first, by careful analysis of them, rise to some simple and comprehensive principles, and then, by the power of these principles, solve the perplexities of duty, interpret the mysteries of Providence, trace the tendencies of

life, and prophesy the issues of futurity. The first of these processes must be abandoned to men of cultivation ; and I have endeavoured to shew how future generations are interested in its speedy restoration to their guardianship. But the other process, the application of the great moral and devotional principles of the gospel to the living interests of mankind, is eminently popular ; it is the business not of the student, but of the preacher, and of all institutions which aim at the general diffusion of religious influences ; and on its wise conduct depends the character of the present, more than the faith of remoter times.

The attempts made in this country to bring controversy before popular tribunals, while they have made theology superficial, have rendered religion sectarian. There is very little soul-felt repose upon a venerated faith, very little free and earnest and simple application of any principles to the relations of individual or social life ; but a restless, uneasy feeling, which vents itself in every class by enmity to others' creeds, and is little soothed by satisfaction with its own. The plea of mystery is still urged in behalf of the ancient doctrines ; but it no longer receives a willing acquiescence : the plea of rationality defends our own faith ; but with a success almost as dubious. Perhaps both are imperfectly adapted to the existing state of the general mind ; the former, to its modes of thought ; the latter, to its modes of feeling. Every age has its prevailing

character, its prevailing taste, which will influence even the most dissimilar forms of its literature; and any class of productions that pretends to alienate itself from this influence must share the fate of all that sits apart from the heart of society; it will be neglected first, and then despised. At the era of the reformation, the plea of mystery was nothing strange; men were accustomed to mysteries every where—in history, in science, in life; their principles of investigation had not been defined; their feelings of veneration had not yet settled on the true and ascertainable; the habit of submission to authority was but imperfectly broken; the awe which will always be given to the sublime, the infinite, the eternal, was yielded to the unintelligible; and when the appeal in religion was made to the mysterious, the loftiest minds of the age heard it and did it reverence, and delighted to repose on its imagined sanctity. Hence, the whole literature and speech of those times were pervaded by hearty allusions to the notions which needed this defence; they were not confined to the works of controversialists and priests; not abandoned to the exposition of professional believers; neither blazoned forth with the air of effrontery on the one hand, nor insinuated with timid apology on the other; but, like all ideas which are sincerely embraced, they assumed their natural place in the stock of general sentiment, and filled their natural proportion in its utterance. This state of things has long passed away. But it

does not follow, that because the minds of men are no longer satisfied with the mysterious, their hearts will be contented with the rational. They feel that, after the proof of a faith, must come its use ; wearied of the eternal talk of the corruptions of religion, they entreat to be presented with its pure and fresh influences. They desire to reach the end of this long and hard theological ascent, and, resting on the elevation to which it should conduct them, gaze down on the outspread scenery of life and Providence, and watch the gliding of its shadows, and trace the streams of its mighty tendencies.

The sectarian state of theology in this country cannot but be regarded as eminently unnatural. Its cold and hard ministrations are entirely alien to the wants of the popular mind, which, except under the discipline of artificial influences, is always most awake to generous impressions. Its malignant exclusiveness is a perversion of the natural veneration of the human heart, which, except where it is interfered with by narrow and selfish systems, pours itself out, not in hatred towards any thing that lives, but in love to the invisible objects of trust and hope. Its disputatious trifling is an insult to the sanctity of conscience, which, except where it is betrayed into oblivion of its delicate and holy office, supplicates of religion, not a new ferocity of dogmatism, but an enlargement and refinement of its sense of right. It is the temper of sectarianism to seize on every deformity of every creed, and exhibit this

caricature to the world's gaze and aversion. It is the spirit of the soul's natural piety to alight on whatever is beautiful and touching in every faith, and take there its secret draught of pure and fresh emotion. It is the passages of poetry and pathos in a system, which alone can lay a strong hold on the general mind and give them permanence ; and even the wild fictions which have endeared Romanism to the hearts of so many centuries possess their elements of tenderness and magnificence. The fundamental principle of one who would administer religion to the minds of his fellow-men should be, that all that has ever been extensively venerated must possess ingredients that are venerable. If, in the spirit of sectarianism, he sees nothing in it but absurdity, it only proves that he does not see it all ; it must have an aspect, which he has not yet caught, that awes the imagination, or touches the affections, or moves the conscience ; and those who receive it neither will nor should abandon it, till something is substituted, not only more consonant with the reason but more awakening to these higher faculties of soul. Hence, a rigid accuracy and logical penetration of mind, the power of detecting and exposing error, are not the only qualities needed by the religious reformer : and in a deep and reverential sympathy with human feelings, a quick perception of the great and beautiful, a promptitude to cast himself into the minds of others, and gaze through their eyes at the objects which they love, he will find the

instrument of the sublimest intellectual power. The precise logician may sit eternally in the centre of his own circle of correct ideas, and preach demonstrably the folly of the world's superstitions ; yet he will never affect the thoughts of any but marble-minded beings like himself. He disregards the fine tissue of emotions that clings round the objects which he so harshly handles ; and has yet to learn the art of preserving its fabric unimpaired, while he enfolds within it something more worthy for it to foster and adore.

As, then, it is to the moral and imaginative powers of the human mind that religion chiefly attaches itself, as it is by these that the want of it is most strongly felt, so is it to these that its ministrations should be, for the most part, addressed. While theologians are discussing the evidences of creeds, let teachers be conducting them to their applications. Let their respective resources of feeling and conception be unfolded before the soul of mankind ; let it be tried what mental energy they can inspire, what purity of moral perception infuse, what dignity of principle erect, what toils of philanthropy sustain. Thus would arise a new criterion of judgment between differing systems ; for that system must possess most truth, which creates the most intelligence and virtue. Thus would the deeper devotional wants of society be no longer mocked by the privilege of choice among a few captious, verbal, and precise forms of belief. Thus, too, would the

alienation which repels sect from sect give place to an incipient and growing sympathy ; for when high intellect and excellence approach and stand in meek homage beneath the cross, how soon are the jarring voices of disputants hushed in the stillness of reverence ! Who does not feel the refreshment, when some stream of pure poetry, like Heber's, winds into the desert of theology ! when some flash of genius, like that of Chalmers, darts through its dull atmosphere ! some strains of eloquence, like those of Channing, float from a distance on its heavy silence !

Such, then, are the objects which should be contemplated by those who, in the present times, aim at the reformation of religious sentiment : first, the elevation of theology as an intellectual pursuit ; secondly, the better application of religion as a moral influence. Both these objects are directly or indirectly promoted by the Association, whose cause I am privileged to advocate. It aids the first, by the distribution of many a work, the production of such minds as must redeem theology from contempt. It advances the second, by establishing union and sympathy among those, whose first principles are in direct contradiction to all that is sectarian, and who desire only to emancipate the understanding from all that enfeebles, and the heart from all that narrows it. The triumph of its doctrines would be, not the ascendancy of one sect, but the

harmony of all. Let but the diversities which separate Christians retire, and the truths which they all profess to love advance to prominence, and, whatever may become of party names, our aims are fulfilled, and our satisfaction is complete. When faith in the paternity of God shall have kindled an affectionate and lofty devotion ; when the vision of immortality, imparted by Christ's resurrection, shall have created that spirit of duty which was the holiest inspiration of his life ; when the sincere recognition of human brotherhood shall have supplanted all exclusive institutions, and banded society together under the vow of mutual aid, and the hope of everlasting progress,—our work will be done, our reward before us, and our little community of reformers lost in the wide fraternity of enlightened and benevolent men.

That day is yet distant, and can be won only by the toil of earnest and faithful minds. In the meanwhile, it is no light solace to see that the tendencies of Providence are towards its accelerated approach. And however dispiriting may sometimes be the variety and conflicts of human sentiment—however remote the dissonance of controversy from that harmony of will which would seem essential to perfected society, it is through this very process that the great ends of improvement are to be attained. Hereafter it will be seen, much more clearly than we can see it now, that opinion generates know-

ledge. Like the ethereal waves, whose inconceivable rapidity and number are said to impart the sensation of vision, the undulations of opinion are speeding on to produce the perception of truth : they are the infinitely complex and delicate movements of that universal Human Mind, whose quiescence is darkness—whose agitation, light.

NOTE. *

NOTE B., p. 12.

THE allusion is to Dr. Wardlaw's recent work, entitled "Christian Ethics." The leading idea of this publication is, that almost all that the world has yet seen under the name of moral science is radically unsound, because it has overlooked the depravity which the fall of Adam entailed upon his race; and that human nature is not in a condition to yield any moral philosophy at all. The originality of this idea, its exhibition in a tangible form of the obvious hostility of orthodoxy to science, and the striking illustration which the volume containing it affords of some of the foregoing remarks on English theology, tempt me to a few comments on the reasonings by which it is supported.

Moral philosophy is correctly described by Dr. Wardlaw, as founded upon an analysis of human nature: for it is necessary to understand the constitution of that spiritual system, the healthy performance of whose functions we seek to secure. Into this analysis, the fact of human depravity is represented as introducing "two distinct sources of error." Man, in the pursuit of moral science, being both the investigator, and the subject of investigation,—one source of error arises from "the influence of his depravity on his character as an investigator; and another from the disposition to make his own nature, without

* Omit, in p. 6, reference to Note A.

adverting to its fallen state, his standard of moral principles, and his *study* in endeavouring to ascertain them."

(1.) It is said that the investigating mind being corrupt, all its processes are liable to be vitiated. "A corrupt tendency has been infused into all his speculations and reasonings; so that, on every point that relates to religion and virtue, his conclusions are not, without great caution, to be depended upon." It is pronounced "preposterous to commit the decision of an inquiry respecting the true principles of *moral rectitude*, to a creature subject to all the blinding and perverting influences of *moral pravity*." Dr. W. uses this principle to prove that philosophers are incapable, in virtue of their apostate nature, of forming scientific judgments, of perceiving natural relations, or of applying criteria of duty. System after system is passed under review, and dismissed as worthless, because, whatever rule of duty it adopts, that rule has to be conducted to its application by a mind already corrupt. If we pronounce that to be right, which is in accordance with nature, how can a being whose nature is out of order be intrusted with such a principle? If that which is approved by the moral sense, how escape the perversions arising from the disorder of the moral sense? If that which produces the greatest amount of happiness, how can we rely on the computations of a judgment whose views of happiness are totally distorted?

Comprehensive as Dr. W.'s dissatisfaction is with human reasoning on ethical and religious subjects, it must surely be carried a little further: the application of his principle is not exhausted. The taint of pravity must be universal; it cannot affect some processes of thought, and exempt others; it must introduce the element of error into *all* our moral reasonings, and among others, into that by which the existence of natural corruption is discovered. The human being is depraved while occupied in proving his own pravity; and this proof is therefore as little deserving of confidence as any other exercise of his faculties. If they are incompetent to other offices of ratiocination on their own character and condition, they are for the same reason incompetent to this; and the philosopher, in defence of his ethics, may as justly plead the corruption of the divine, as

the divine, in defence of his theology, the corruption of the philosopher. The proof of the worthlessness of the opposing systems is at all events mutual.

It is in vain to say, that the doctrine of human corruption does not depend upon any exercise of the mental powers, but possesses the higher authority of inspiration. This only removes the difficulty a little farther back. For the doctrine of inspiration is itself only a result of previous reasonings, and is exposed to all the uncertainties of their fallibility. The Scriptures either claim to be inspired, or they do not. If they do not, no one can, without absurdity, prefer the claim for them. If they do, the pretension must be justified by proving their credibility; this involves the establishment of their authenticity; and this rests upon the attestation of numerous witnesses, whose character and circumstances must be investigated, and the authenticity of whose alleged writings must be evinced, before their testimony can be accepted. This golden link of inspiration, then, does but terminate a concatenation of purely human reasonings, and can sustain no weight which they will not bear. To it, either as a conclusion, or as a source of further deductions, there must attach precisely the degree of credit or discredit which may belong to the natural judgments which are its premises. The case, then, stands thus. In the department of philosophy we have the mind engaged in analyzing the constitution and faculties of man; in the department of theology, we have the same mind engaged in analyzing that complicated historical evidence which, through the successive steps of the authenticity, the credibility, the inspiration of the Scriptures, is supposed to establish the fallen condition of human nature. A corrupt state of the investigating mind cannot be urged against the one process, without equally invalidating the other. A maniac may commit as many fallacies in proving his own mania as in disproving it.

On the principle of the foregoing reasoning it would follow, that inspiration can never be pleaded in behalf of any doctrine which is contradicted by natural evidence. Suppose that apparent inspiration teaches the simultaneous creation of man and of all the other organisms of the globe; suppose that

science teaches that the origin of the human species was later, by an incalculable period, than certain earlier forms of animal life. The conclusion of the geologist rests upon physical evidence: he finds amid the ruins of the world's ancient structure, traces of a long interval between the birth of the first and that of the last of its living inhabitants; there are phenomena, that is, which, on the principle that like consequents have like antecedents, require this interval for their cause. The conclusion of the theologian rests on historical evidence; its base is in that mass of testimony on which inspiration itself is thrown back for its authority; he finds in that testimony traces of honesty and competency; there are appearances, that is, which, on the principle that like consequents have like antecedents, require these qualities for their cause. Of course, as the conclusions are different, there must be a fallacy somewhere; but that the philosophy is wrong and the theology right, we cannot affirm, unless it can be shewn that the physical evidence comprises sources of error from which the moral evidence is exempt. The difficulty cannot be set at rest by saying, that the attestation of God is superior to that of human reasoning; the very existence of this divine attestation being itself a deposition given in by human reason. The true state of mind in such a case is a state of doubt, until the point shall be discovered at which the false step of argument has been taken.

In his last lecture, Dr. W. has treated fully this imagined opposition of divinity and science; but he has given a verdict in the case, against which all lovers of truth, to whichever party their sympathies may incline, will, I think, do well to protest. While he censures the philosopher for his inattention to the claims of Scripture, he excuses the divine from all obligation to listen to the reasoning of the philosopher. It is not his business, we are assured, "to harmonize the discoveries of the inspired document with the dogmata of the philosopher; but it is incumbent on the philosopher, unless he can fairly meet and set aside the proofs of its inspiration, to bring his dogmata to the test of the document." The duty of the theologian, after having established the authority of his standard, is to regard it, on all matters of which it treats, as the only philosophy, and to demand implicit faith, without gainsaying, to its decisions. But can any

one fail to perceive, that the process by which the divine "establishes the authority of his standard," is only co-ordinate in certainty with that by which the philosopher establishes his truth; and the tenets cannot receive from "the standard" a certainty greater than its own. Hence, although entirely agreeing with Dr. W. in lamenting the indifference of men of science to the claims of Revelation, and thinking that there is both ignorance and bigotry in the contempt with which they have occasionally treated these claims, I cannot see how theology can be held innocent of precisely a similar offence against philosophy. The evil can never be cured by claims on implicit belief, which in both parties are arrogant alike. Each must spare a little attention for the researches of the other, but they can never meet in sympathy, till it be on equal terms.

(2.) The second source of error in ethical science arises from the corruption of human nature, considered as the thing investigated. The nature analyzed, it is said, being depraved, the philosophy deduced from that analysis is undeserving of reliance. The following considerations may assist us in estimating the force of this objection.

Moral philosophy proposes, as its end, the perfection of man as a voluntary being; it aims at the creation of a perfect system of voluntary action, and such an adjustment of the internal dispositions as will best secure it. For this purpose, two processes are necessary:

1. An enumeration must be made of all the actions and dispositions of the human being; they are the materials from which we have to select and discard, and we must have an arranged list of them. The catalogue must be in our hands, before the index expurgatorius is made out. In other words, the human mind must be analyzed, and its faculties and affections be disposed in some order for classification. This, however, is only preliminary to the great business of moral philosophy; it belongs rather to mental than to ethical science, and is of use in the latter, only as it facilitates the orderly examination of the several actions and dispositions, on whose relative excellence it is the office of morals to pronounce.

2. Having placed before him the total number of disposi-

tions and actions, it is the next task of the investigator to pass them severally in review, and estimate their values. In order to effect this, he must determine on some test or measure of moral value, which may be run successively through them all, and decide their position in the moral scale. The different tests or criteria of duty, as they are called, which different writers have adopted, have given rise to the various systems of moral philosophy ;—one author trying every act and affection by its tendency to the happiness of the agent, another by its tendency to the happiness of others, another by its tendency to both ; a fourth, by its conformity with the moral sense, a fifth by its congruity with nature, or its accordance with the relations of things. But, whatever rule of judgment be adopted, the object is to select those forms of conduct whose qualities are the best, and combine them into one view of perfect human action and affection.

Now, suppose human nature to be corrupt ; which of these two researches would thus be vitiated ? This corruption can be conceived of only under three forms. It must either have obliterated entirely some good affection, or introduced some evil one ; or, without altering the number of principles in the mind, have raised the inferior ones to an injurious ascendancy over the rest.

If the whole number remains the same, or if it has been increased by the accession of some evil propensity, the complete list can evidently still be made out for examination ; the analysis of human nature may be perfect. Nor is there any thing to prevent the moral valuation of this list from proceeding as correctly as before. The tests of eligibility which were applied to actions and dispositions may be applied again with precisely the same success ; and to assert that the deteriorated quality of those actions and dispositions incapacitates them for undergoing estimate, is to say, that the rules by which we approve the good cannot be applied to the condemnation of the bad. It may indeed be urged, that one of the tests of goodness, viz. conformity with the moral sense, may be rendered worthless by a corruption, from which this faculty itself is not exempt. But this objection affects the mind, regarded as the valuator, not as being the object of valuation ; it tends to prove the incompe-

tency of the philosopher to conducting his examination, not the incapacity of mankind for undergoing examination. And this form of objection has been already considered.

If the depravity has extinguished some good faculty of the human mind, that faculty either is now attainable, or it is not. If it is not, it is no proper object of cognizance to the moral philosopher, who has to do only with the voluntary part of our nature; and it would be as absurd in him to recommend it, as to exhort men to possess themselves of corporeal immortality, which (with it) is supposed to have been a part of the paradisaical state. If it be attainable, it must have been attained, and be discoverable somewhere. Minds are surely to be found which contain this supplementary faculty, and present it to the investigation of the philosopher. If he should be so unhappy as not to possess it himself, it is certainly his duty to examine its manifestations in others, to place it in his enumeration of possible human dispositions, and to appreciate it with impartiality. But no reason can be alleged, why the absence of this quality, whatever it be, from some minds, should prevent a just estimate of its worth in those in whom it exists.

I have noticed Dr. Wardlaw's objection to moral philosophy in its most abstract form, because I confess myself unable to understand his illustrations of it, or at least to reconcile them either with one another, or with any idea, not wholly erroneous, of the nature and objects of moral science. He appears to regard the whole business of ethics, in consisting in that which I have mentioned as its preliminary step,—in a process of mental analysis, a decomposition of the compound mind, and a statement of its elementary tendencies. He forgets its subsequent and chief office, of rejecting the evil tendencies and choosing the good, and speaks as if moralists were in the habit of turning all the sinfulness of mankind into their moral systems, and taking the average of human character as the standard of moral perfection! This mode of conception appears in the following passage: "How can any thing but error and confusion, or, at best, mingled and partial truth, be the result of an attempt to discover the principles of moral rectitude from the constitution of a depraved nature?—to extract a pure system of ethics from the elements of corruption?—to found the super-

structure of moral science on the scattered and unstable rubbish of fallen humanity ?

“ Let me illustrate my meaning by a simple comparison :— Suppose a chemist were desirous to ascertain the ingredients of water ; what estimate should we form of his judgment, if, with this view, he were to subject to his analysis a quantity of what had just passed, in the bed of a sluggish river, through the midst of a large manufacturing city, from whose common sewers, and other outlets of impurity, it had received every possible contamination which, either by simple admixture or by chemical affinity, had become incorporated with the virgin purity of the fountain ; and if, proceeding on such analysis, he were to publish to the world his *thesis* on the composition of water ? Little less preposterous must be the conduct of those philosophers who derive their ideas of what constitutes rectitude in morals, from human nature *as it is*. They analyze the water of the polluted river, and refuse the guide that would conduct them to the mountain spring of its native purity.”

If the chemist were required to analyze the mountain spring, he would certainly be sufficiently foolish to take his sample from the city stream ; and if the moralist were required to state the composition of an angel, or write essays on the intellectual and active powers of Adam and Eve, he would be equally unwise to take as their representatives the present inhabitants of the world. But if some further object were in view than the gratification of scientific curiosity ; if the chemist happened to concern himself with the health of the citizens, and proposed to investigate the source of their diseases, so far as they might be connected with the water in daily use, he would deserve their thanks for submitting to his tests a specimen from a neighbouring river, and presenting to them, if needs be, his thesis upon it ; and though he might not be able to tell them how many ingredients would be found at the fountain head, and how many had been acquired from subsequent admixture, he would set himself to the more useful task of determining, by experiment and observation, which were deleterious and which salubrious to animal life. And in like manner the moralist, aiming at the detection of poisonous elements in the spiritual condition of mankind, must take that condition as it is, - tabulate all its constituents ; and instead of perplexing himself with the ques-

tion, how many of them have descended from the outside, and how many from the inside of the gate of paradise, endeavour to discern which of them tend to the well-being, and which to the peril of his kind. Does Dr. Wardlaw really believe philosophical morality to be desirable only from the analysis of the souls of our first parents? As well surely might Plato have derived his ethics from the fancied laws which governed his world of pre-existent souls. At all events, it is difficult to see why those whom Dr. W. regards as regenerate and elect, in whom the original perfection of human nature is conceived to be restored, may not afford to the moral analyst the immaculate samples which his object requires.

I cannot deny myself the relief of expressing, before I conclude this note, the melancholy feeling with which I closed this volume of Dr. Wardlaw's. I was before convinced of the general disfavour with which the advocates of the popular theology regard all the higher departments of intellectual pursuit. But when a divine, held in deserved esteem for acuteness, learning, and worth, one whose powers and attainments might be expected to refine and ameliorate the tendencies of his creed, was found to be the unabashed and honest apologist of an antipathy so fatal, the conviction was forced upon me with a new and sad reality. The discourses which compose this volume were delivered at the Congregational Library, in London,—an institution recently established by the Independents, “with a view to the promotion of ecclesiastical, theological, and biblical literature” in that religious connexion. They form the first of a series of endowed annual Lectures, designed to call forth the varied talent and resources of the congregational preachers, and to emulate the Boyle, the Warburton, and the Bampton Lectures. The design is worthy and dignified; but it is a sad comment on the temper of English religion, that the very first of these imposing literary efforts is an attempt to extinguish the philosophy of morals, and to add the sentiment of theological horror to that mercenary aversion which already prevails towards a study so truly ennobling, but so little profitable.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9999 06571 663 9

Boston Public Library
Central Library, Copley Square

Division of
Reference and Research Services

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.

Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

AUG 26 1889

